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UNCLAS CAIRO 007946

SIPDIS

NEA/PD FOR FRANK FINVER

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION COVERAGE REVS UP: EGYPTIAN
MEDIA THEMES, OCTOBER 11 TO 16

1. Summary: The Egyptian media intensified parliamentary election coverage with several announcements about the NDP and opposition parties' candidate lists, along with the announcement, on October 15, that President Mubarak would be personally leading the NDP's parliamentary campaign. An unsigned editorial in the leading pro-government daily, Al-Ahram, encouraged voters to go to the polls. While coverage of preparations for Iraq's October 15 constitutional referendum received criticism from columnists who alleged it would "divide Iraqis," coverage of the conduct of the referendum itself mentioned the high turnout and showed images of smiling Iraqi families casting their votes. Several commentators alleged that the U.S. might use the death of Syria's Interior Minister to connect Syria with Hariri's death in order to "divert attention from the Iraqi quagmire." End summary.

2. Egyptian parliamentary elections: On October 11, the media reported that President Mubarak had issued a decree setting the date for the first round of parliamentary elections for November 9. Later in the week, on October 14, the media reported that Mubarak had approved the list of ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) candidates for November's parliamentary elections. The headline of ardently pro-government Al-Gomhouriya (circulation: 200,000) on October 15 read, "Mubarak himself is leading the campaign for the parliament of the future." Egyptian TV also reported on October 15 and 16 that Mubarak would be "personally leading the NDP campaign." Unsigned editorials in Al-Ahram on October 15 urged people to vote, noting that "the NDP and the opposition are showing seriousness in the campaign." All major Egyptian newspapers reported on October 12 that the Muslim Brotherhood would field 170 candidates and coordinate its electoral campaign with several opposition parties.

3. Iraq: Iraq's constitutional referendum came in for a wave of criticism by Egypt's print commentators during the week leading up to October 15. In opposition daily Al-Wafd (circulation: 50,000), a columnist wrote on October 11 that the constitution "is a plot to divide and eliminate Iraq." The same day, reflecting the dark view of the constitution held by many Egyptian commentators, a columnist wrote in pro-government daily Al-Ahram (circulation: 750,000) that "civil war in Iraq has already begun," claiming the constitution would "continue to divide Iraqis." Another columnist opined on October 15 in pro-government Akhbar Al-Youm (circulation: 1,000,000) that the constitution "will not change the situation in Iraq, which is on the verge of civil war." Opinions became more cautiously optimistic after the referendum; on October 16, Egyptian TV reported that over 60 percent of Iraqis had voted on the constitutional referendum in "peaceful" voting. The print media also reported the referendum's high turnout on page one with images of smiling Iraqis voting with their families.

4. Death of Syrian Interior Minister: On October 14, the Egyptian media historically friendly and non-critical of the Asad regime reported Syria Interior Minister Kanaan's death as a "suicide," although it noted that the Lebanese media doubted that assessment. The same day, several commentaries in pro-government Al-Akhbar (circulation: 800,000) eschewed discussing Kanaan's death in any detail, and focused instead on alleged U.S. plans against Syria. "The U.S. is only using Syria to divert attention away from the Iraqi quagmire," wrote Al-Akhbar's Editor-in-chief,

Mohamed Barakat, in a long commentary on October 14. "One must wonder if the U.S. will use the minister's suicide to prove its allegations of Syrian involvement in Hariri's death," mused another Al-Akhbar columnist the same day. The former Editor-in-chief of Al-Gomhouriya, Samir Ragab, wrote on October 14 that he also expected the U.S. "would use Kanaan's death to connect Syria with Hariri's death." Ragab also wrote that he hoped "the Syrian people did not suffer any more violence, as happens in Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, and Darfur. Otherwise, terrorism will increase."

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